



The following questions were posted on www.kingsolver.com, a website maintained for Barbara Kingsolver by Harper Collins, her publisher. The answers are from the author.

Could you comment on the research and life experience that helped you to accurately recreate the world of missionaries and Congolese villagers in your latest novel? Your depiction is enthralling!

Answer: Historical fiction is a frightening labor-intensive proposition. It took me many years to write *The Poisonwood Bible*, most of them spent on research which fell into several categories.

Most obviously, I read a lot of books about the political, social, and natural history of Africa and the Congo. Some of these are listed in a bibliography at the end of the novel; dozens more are not. Sometimes, reading a whole, densely-written book on, say, the formation and dissolution of indigenous political parties during the Congolese independence, or an account of the life histories of Central African venomous snakes, would move me only a sentence or two forward in my understanding of my subject. But every sentence mattered. I knew it would take years, and tried to be patient. Some of my sources were famous and well-written, but most were obscurities, like the quirky self-published memoirs written by missionaries to the Congo in the 50s and 60s, which I'd sometimes find in used book stores. These were gems, rendering clear details of missionary life and attitudes from the era.

I read, and re-read daily, from the King James Bible. It gave me the rhythm of the Price family's speech, the frame of reference for their beliefs, and countless plot ideas.

Likewise, I began nearly every writing day by perusing a huge old two-volume Kikongo-French dictionary, compiled early in the century (by a missionary, of course). Slowly I began to grasp the music and subtlety of this amazing African language, with its infinite capacity for being misunderstood and mistranslated.

One of the novel's challenges was the matter of capturing the language of teenage females from the Southeastern U.S. in the late 1950s. Since I was barely alive then, this was also foreign territory. Teenage speech is stereotyped and notoriously ephemeral; if I'd just guessed, it would have sounded inauthentic. This stumped me, until I hit paydirt in a used book store in Boston: 35 pounds (I had to mail them home) of *Life*, *Look*, and *Saturday Evening Post* magazines from 1958-1961. I spent hours immersed in the news, attitudes, and advertisements of these years. Slowly the voices of my novel began to emerge, and Rachel Price-like Athena was born fully formed, with every hair in place: "Aren't you glad you use Dial? Don't you wish everybody did?"

Another kind of research I did, as your question suggests, was in the domain of life experience. I happen to have spent a brief portion of my childhood (1963) in a small village in central Congo, and this undoubtedly gave that place permanent importance in my mind. I have strong sensory memories of playing with village children and exploring the jungle. When I began the novel my parents shared photographs and journals from that time, which helped stir my own memories. My parents were not missionaries, but we met several missionary families in Africa (though none quite like the Prices, I'm happy to report), so I knew little of that life. But the bottom line is this: I was a child, in 1963, and understood only about a thimbleful of what was happening around me in the Congo. The thematic material of *The Poisonwood Bible* is serious, adult stuff. I wrote the book, not because of a brief adventure I had in place of second grade, but because as an adult I'm interested in cultural imperialism and post-colonial history. I had to approach the subject in an adult way.

Books can provide only verbally-rendered information. I also needed to know things about Africa that must be learned first-hand. I made research trips into Western and Central Africa (as near as I could get to Mobutu's Zaire), and kept detailed journals on sounds, smells, textures, tastes, and the sort of domestic trivia that seldom shows up in important books. Whenever possible I stayed with residents of the area I was visiting, and I always volunteered to cook dinner so I could walk to a village market with coins in hand and face the daunting, educational experience of bargaining and bringing home the ingredients of a decent meal. I asked a lot of questions that many Africans surely found amusing and too personal, but once in a while I struck up a friendship. I'm especially grateful for these— the Senegalese mother, the University student in Cotonou, who suffered my curiosity for days on end, frankly giving me views on religion, history, and family life that would permanently alter my universe.

I spent time in museums, here and abroad, studying exhibits of African religion and material culture. I lost myself in the amazing Okapi diorama in the American Museum of Natural History. And I spent one unforgettable afternoon in the Reptile House of the San Diego Zoo, watching a green mamba.

So there you have it: what I did last summer, and the many seasons before. If this laundry list of disparate observations seems excessive or odd, I can only say that this is what it means to be a novelist. You have to be madly in love with the details.

This novel, *The Poisonwood Bible*, seems a departure from your previous work. Why a novel about the Congo?

Answer: This story came from passion, culpability, anger and a long-term fascination with Africa, and my belief that what happened to the Congo is one of the most important political parables of our century. I've been thinking about this story for as long as I've had eyes and a heart. I live in a country that has done awful things, all over the world, in my name. You can't miss that. I didn't make those decisions, but I have benefitted from them materially. I live in a society that grew prosperous from exploiting others. England has a strong tradition of post-colonial literature but here in the U.S., we can hardly even say the word "post-colonial." We like to think we're the good guys. So we persist in our denial, and live with a legacy of exploitation and racial arrogance that continues to tear people apart, in a million large and small ways. As long as I have been a writer I've wanted to address this, to try to find a way to own our terrible history honestly and construct some kind of redemption. It's a preposterously outsized ambition. That's why I waited 30 years to write it--who wouldn't? I'd have waited a hundred, but I realized I'd be dead before I was truly smart enough to write this book, so I'd better get it started while I was still kicking.

The evangelist Nathan Price never speaks for himself in this tale, we only see him through the eyes of his wife and daughters. Why did you not give Nathan a voice?

Answer: Because of what the story is about. Some people seem to think this is a male/female issue, but that never even crossed my mind. Nathan obviously doesn't represent maleness! He represents an historical attitude. This book is a political allegory, in which the small incidents of characters' lives shed light on larger events in our world. The Prices carry into Africa a whole collection of beliefs about religion, technology, health, politics, and agriculture, just as industrialized nations have often carried these beliefs into the developing world in an extremely arrogant way, very certain of being right (even to the point of destroying local ideas, religion and leadership), even when it turns out-- as it does in this novel-- that those attitudes are useless, offensive or inapplicable. I knew most of my readers would feel unsympathetic to that arrogance. We didn't make the awful decisions our government imposed on Africa. We didn't call for the assassination of Lumumba; we hardly even knew about it. We just inherited these decisions, and now have to reconcile them with our sense of who we are. We're the captive witnesses, just like the wife and daughters of Nathan Price. Male or female, we are not like him. That is what I wanted to write about. We got pulled into this mess but we don't identify with that arrogant voice. It's not his story. It's ours.

Are you sympathetic at all to Nathan Price?

Answer: Sympathy isn't the question. He has caused desperate harm-- who can sympathize with that? But he's obviously charismatic, and complex. He's the center of this universe, hard to walk away from. He's a force to be reckoned with.

Do you consider this novel to be antagonistic toward Christianity, or missionaries?

Answer: Some people seem to think that, but I certainly don't, and I took some care to try and make that clear. In fact, my favorite character is Brother Fowles, whose role in the novel is to redeem both Christianity and the notion of mission. I happen to think religion is a wonderful thing-- I'm only opposed to arrogant proselytizing. Nathan Price is, indeed, an arrogant proselytizer, but he's not the only agent of Christianity here. His wife and daughters take different paths toward more open-minded kinds of spirituality, and I called in Brother Fowles specifically to represent Christian mission in a kinder voice. Christianity, like every other major religion, has a million different voices and I think it's very . . . ? (*interview transcript is interrupted*).

Which character or scene is the most important in the book, in your opinion?

Answer: I know, from reading my mail, that every reader takes something different from this book. Readers have written in their votes for most beloved character & favorite scene, and practically everything gets a vote. (Even the dum-dum Rachel is far more popular than I expected.) Some people's lives were changed by the ants passing through the village eating everything in their path; others said their world view was rocked when they read that many people think democracy is a profoundly unfair political system. (It leaves nearly half the population unsatisfied, all the time.) Every character here (except Nathan) was somebody's favorite. I would never bias my readers by telling them what I think is important. It's all important, or it wouldn't be there. You'll take from it what your life requires. The beauty of literary fiction is that it's acutely personal.

What does this novel say about marriage?

Answer: I wasn't thinking about "marriage" in general, as I wrote this. The particular marriage I invented for Nathan and Orleanna is a very unhappy one. It began in passion but became an arrangement of wifely obligation and husbandly domination - obviously a part of the political allegory, but hopefully drawn with enough subtlety that it's also just an interesting marriage to read about. Orleanna has her day, eventually.

Why did you go to all the trouble of telling the story from five different points of view?

Answer: Because it was necessary to the theme of this novel. I conceived the structure this way from the very beginning, even though I knew it would be quite difficult to pull off, from the point of view of craft. I spent almost a year just honing the different voices, practicing telling the same scene from all five different angles, until I had differentiated them to the point that the reader would instantly know who was speaking, just from a sentence or two. So yes, it was hard, but it had to be so. The four sisters and Orleanna represent five separate philosophical positions, not just in their family but also in my political examination of the world. This novel is asking, basically, "What did we do to Africa, and how do we feel about it?" It's a huge question. I'd be insulting my readers to offer only one answer. There are a hundred different answers along a continuum, with absolute paralyzing guilt on the one end and "What, me worry? I didn't do it!" on the other end. Orleanna is the paralyzed one here, and Rachel is "What, me worry?" Leah, Adah, and Ruth May take other positions in between, having to do with social activism, empirical analysis, and spirituality, respectively. That's stating it very baldly and makes them sound boring, which is why I always try to avoid answering the question "What does ____ represent in your book?" In the end, all these characters became more quirky and entertaining than what they represent. One of them reads backwards and writes in palindromes. One of them constantly says things like "It was a tapestry of justice!" and "I felt like Gulliver among the Lepidopterans." What began as a thematic challenge became one of the greatest pleasures of creating the book.

Were you consciously trying to create a parallel to *Little Women*, in this story of a mother and four daughters?

Answer: Certainly I considered that other famous family of "little women," as I was writing this. It was one of the most beloved books of my childhood. But the parallels don't go too far. Louisa May Alcott didn't put any snakes in her book.

Would you characterize this book as a post-colonial epic, a psychological novel, a family saga, or what?

Answer: Like most artists, I'm wary about categorizing my work— particularly this novel. It's very large. It's political and domestic, symbolic and epic and, I hope, also a heck of a good read. I believe with all my heart in delivering on my contract with my readers. They've got plenty of other things to do, so I had better give them a reason to turn every one of these 550 pages. This is my promise: I solemnly swear I'll make you laugh out loud at least once, cry a little in private, and bum whatever you left on the stove.

One of the greatest challenges a writer faces is creating multi-faceted characters, and that challenge becomes particularly difficult when the character is as one-sided and single-minded as Nathan Price in *The Poisonwood Bible*. What are your feelings about Nathan? Do you believe you've done him and his faith justice?

Answer: Nathan kept me in thrall for thousands of pages, counting the many drafts of this long novel. Am I pleased with how I rendered him? Of course! I never turn in a manuscript until every character, image, and word is exactly what I want it to be. Nathan is single-minded all right, but hardly one-sided. He's ferocious and cowardly; charismatic and revolting; brilliant and tedious. I'm not sure what you mean by "doing him justice." I certainly don't owe him anything. He's a character, invented by me, for no other purpose than to serve my plot.

As a writer of literary fiction, I count on my readers to have the intelligence and subtlety to understand this relationship between character and theme. Nathan Price doesn't need to represent the missionary profession, any more than Dr. Jekyll represents all physicians or King Lear represents all old men with daughters. *The Poisonwood Bible* is a political allegory. Nathan Price is a symbolic figure at its center, suggesting many things about the way the U.S. and Europe have approached Africa with a history of cultural arrogance and misunderstanding at every turn. He is meant to be difficult to understand, hard to love, and ultimately, something we must all own up to on some level.

Did I do justice to his faith? I believe so, yes. The soul of the book is its portrayal of the divergent spiritual views of its characters. This is by far the most religious book I've written, and it gave me a chance to explore not only African religion, but the spiritual traditions of my own culture. As the very Jesus-like Brother Fowles says, in the novel, "There are Christians, and there are Christians." Nathan Price and Tata Fowles offer an inkling of the extremely wide range of people who use the same name for many different brands of faith and works. The portrayal is complex, I agree. But as surely as Thoreau was suspicious of any endeavor requiring new clothes, I am skeptical of any kind of religion that fits in a sound bite.

Why do you write mostly about women?

Answer: For the same reason I write mostly about people who live in the U.S., who must work for a living, who have functional eyes, ears, and limbs, who speak English, who are raising children, who face imbalances of power in their relationships and lives.

A novel is a rich collection of details all added together in a way that satisfactorily answers some of life's universal questions. I don't believe the categories I listed above are superior to, for example, men, citizens of other countries, people who have no children, who speak Portuguese, or are disabled. I passionately love to read stories of lives vastly different from my own. But when I write, if I hope to arrive at any convincing answers, I have to begin with characters whose details I know by heart.

How do you come up with names for your characters?

Answer: Very carefully. I give almost as much thought to the naming of my principal characters as I did for my children. A name has to be just right: memorable, culturally appropriate, original but not silly. And ideally, it carries some meaning that coincides nicely with the person's intentions and character.

In the case of my children, I had to put something on the birth certificate long before I had a clue about intentions or character. (I named them both for flowering plants -- it seemed safe to assume they'd grow.) But in fiction, I have the advantage of naming people after their whole lives have passed before my eyes. Meaning must be subtle, of course. You can't go around calling all your domineering guys "Victor". But every name has shades to it, and sometimes I test a lot of them on the back of my tongue before finding the right one. Halimeda and Cosima (the Noline sisters, in *Animal Dreams*) I found in a *Name Your Baby* book I use often for this purpose -- one of those that gives the meaning and derivation of a million names you never would have thought of yourself. (And your kids are glad you didn't.) Halimeda and Cosima are the kind of names their intellectual, culturally disconnected father would have given these poor girls. And the particular burdens of those names become central to Hallie's and Codi's sense of themselves and each other, throughout the novel. This is how I usually arrive at names, through revision and study. When I was researching *Pigs in Heaven*, I found the first and last names for my Cherokee attorney, Annawake Fourkiller, on two separate gravestones in a cemetery in Oklahoma. Occasionally, though, a name pops into my head the instant I visualize the character. Taylor Greer was one of those. (In *The Bean Trees* I had her claim this name for herself after the town where she ran out of gas -- but I already knew the name, so I looked on a map and got her to the right place.)

For main characters I avoid names that are too culturally loaded, like Adolph or Vanna. (Before I could write a single sentence, those two would be off on their own parade through your imagination.) For the same reason, on a more personal level, I try hard to steer clear of first and last names of family members, friends, and colleagues -- which rules out half the *Name Your Baby* books right there. That may be one reason why I tend toward oddball names for my principals: Turtle, Halimeda, Loyd-with-one-L. Names like this also make a character more memorable, and you don't have to worry about them getting teased on the playground. You can just say it builds character. And unlike your children, they won't hold it against you.

Is it possible to become a writer if you don't like to read?

Answer: Not on your life! Believe it or not, someone really did write to ask me that. (I'm tempted to reply: If you didn't like Dalmatians, would you breed them?) But in all fairness, many more people have asked these interesting questions: Who are your favorite authors? What one book would you take to a desert island? And finally, Do you read other people's books while you're writing?

I read as if time were running out, because technically it is. As I grow older I find I'm increasingly impatient with mediocre entertainments: I want books that will take my breath away and realign my vision. As a writer of fiction, I mostly read contemporary fiction, but I also return constantly to the classics. My favorite dead authors are probably George Eliot, Jane Austen, Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner and John Steinbeck. Among my favorite living ones are Doris Lessing, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Annie Dillard, Alice Munro, Isabel Allende, Russell Banks, Linda Hogan, John Irving, Toni

Morrison, Eudora Welty and Reynolds Price. And I rely on Emily Dickinson, Sharon Olds, Pablo Neruda, Dylan Thomas, and William Shakespeare; I immerse myself often in poetry, I guess, for the same reason painters rinse their brushes -- to keep the colors true. I also love memoir if it's truly great, which is to say, about something larger than one person's life (Nabokov's *Invitation of a Spring*; Margaret Mead's *Blackberry Winter*; Nancy Mairs's *Waist High in the World*), and I'm devoted to good science writing (Darwin for the poetry of his world view; Stephen Jay Gould for the insight).

If I were exiled to that famous island where they only let you take one book, I would cheat and take two: George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, and Annie Dillard's *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek*.

I've heard writers say they don't read other books while they're writing, for fear it will somehow contaminate their style. I don't share this worry. When I'm writing, I read Steinbeck and Shakespeare with all my might, and pray to be contaminated.

I just watched a PBS documentary about you, in which you mentioned your "ten rules for writing fiction," but only explained two of them. Would you mind divulging the other eight? No doubt the show's editors cut them without realizing that aspiring writers would hyperventilate at their omission. (Gasp!)

Answer: Okay, slow down and breathe into a paper bag. I'll answer the question, but remember that things are never really so simple as they seem on TV. In that documentary I spoke of taking a class from Francine Prose in which I learned "about ten basic rules for writing fiction." Well, I exaggerated. From Francine I remember learning three specific, helpful things that might qualify as rules. They were:

1. Your first sentence (or paragraph) makes a promise that the rest of the story (or novel) will keep.
2. Give your reader a reason to turn every page.
3. Keep a very large trash can beside your desk.

I follow these faithfully, though I've updated the wastebasket to a recycling box. Now, lest anyone turn blue, I'll offer up a few more things I've figured out over the years which might qualify as rules. Maybe there will be ten. We'll see.

Show, don't tell. Everybody knows this rule, and most of us still break it in every first draft. Be ruthless. Throw out the interior monologue. Be relentlessly descriptive. Use details from every sense you own. Set your scenes in places you know well. Otherwise, your details will be bogus.

Know what your theme is. If you can't express what you intend to get across in a concrete sentence or two (or for a novel, a few paragraphs), do you really think anyone else is going to get it? Write it out for yourself, point blank. Then toss it, and return to your story with a better sense of direction.

Write with nobody looking over your shoulder. After your book's published, you can worry about whether the subject is commercial, how your mother will like the steamy sex scenes, etc. But while you're writing, your only worthy concern is defining your particular passion and giving it a voice.

Revise, revise, revise, revise. Fill up that recycling box. A first draft is a work of construction; the seventh one is the work of an artist.

Don't wait for the muse. She has a lousy work ethic. Writers just write.

I could easily keep going here, but I'd better save something for the months to come. Meanwhile, breathe deeply and kill your television.